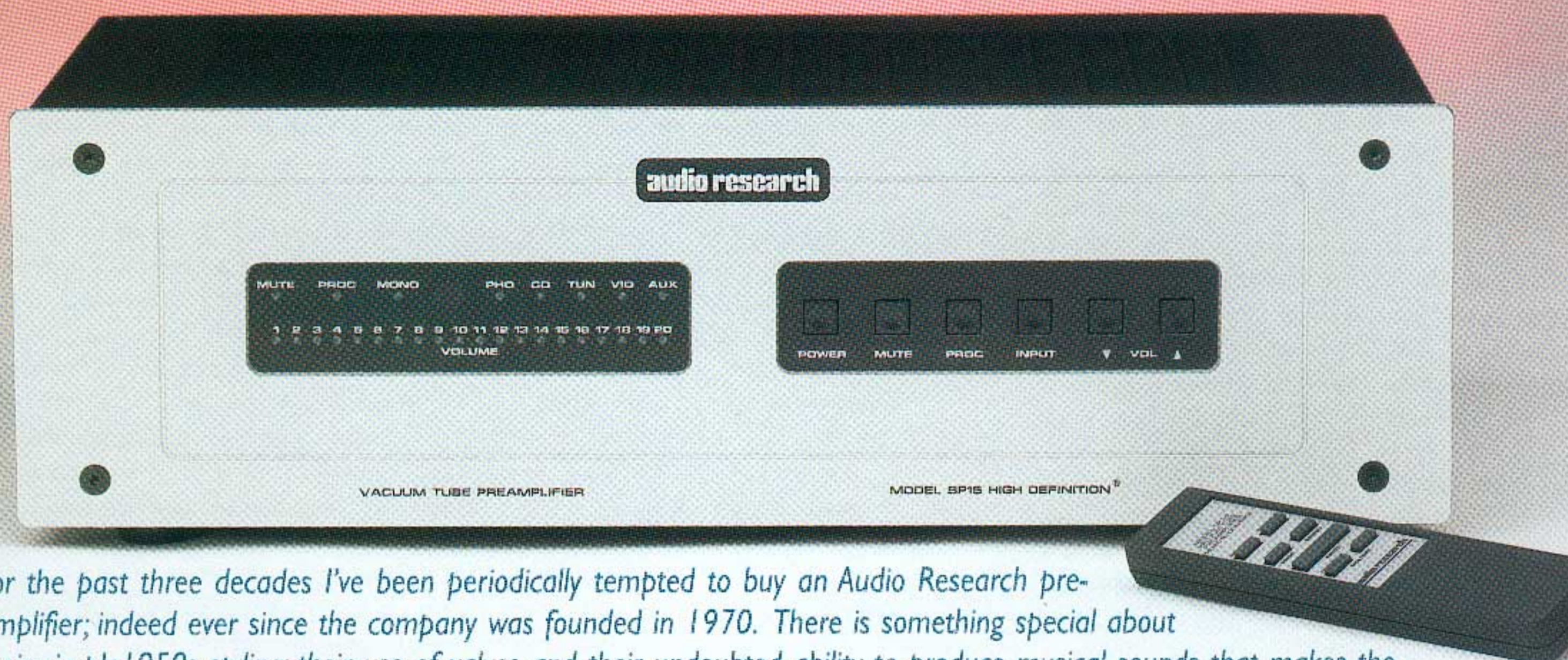


A long-term investment in your future



For the past three decades I've been periodically tempted to buy an Audio Research pre-amplifier; indeed ever since the company was founded in 1970. There is something special about their simple 1950s styling; their use of valves and their undoubted ability to produce musical sounds that makes the product extremely desirable. The latest version of the pre-amplifier, the SP16, carries forward all the traditional features except there are no knobs on the front panel. This is quite a shock to the system when you know the control layout so well but it's all down to the provision of a remote control for those of us who are too lazy to get out of our armchairs. Are there any other shocks in store?

The SP16 pre-amplifier certainly has the right pedigree. The founder of the company, William Z Johnson came out of retirement to help create this new affordable model and so it has all the right DNA incorporating as it does the classic valve circuits for both the phono and line input amplifier stages. In contrast to earlier AR preamps, there are no knobs on the front panel, just six soft-touch buttons for Power, Input selection, Processor Bypass, Volume up/down, and Mute. A row of green LEDs shows the status of all the settings and also the volume level selected. These functions, together with the rarely used Mono/Stereo switching, are also available on the remote control handset. The microprocessor in charge of the remote selection retains the last input selected when the power is switched off. The other feature is a small jack-socket around the back where a 12V trigger output can be used to turn on the power amplifier.

controlled by a 70-step, digitally controlled, switch stepped attenuator which has 0.5dB steps and claimed 0.25dB tracking between the channels. Inside the overall standard of construction is excellent with the bulk of the components mounted on one large printed circuit board. The quality of components is first rate and there is every confidence that this product will have a long reliable life.



We left the SP16 to run in for only a few hours because we really couldn't resist the temptation to start listening. We worked our way through a variety of solid-state power amplifiers including models from Quad, Naim, Marantz and a borrowed Bryston and although none of these, on paper at least, would seem to be an ideal match to the AR the character of this pre-amplifier was always evident. The first thing of note is that contrary to the belief of many that valve amplifiers produce a

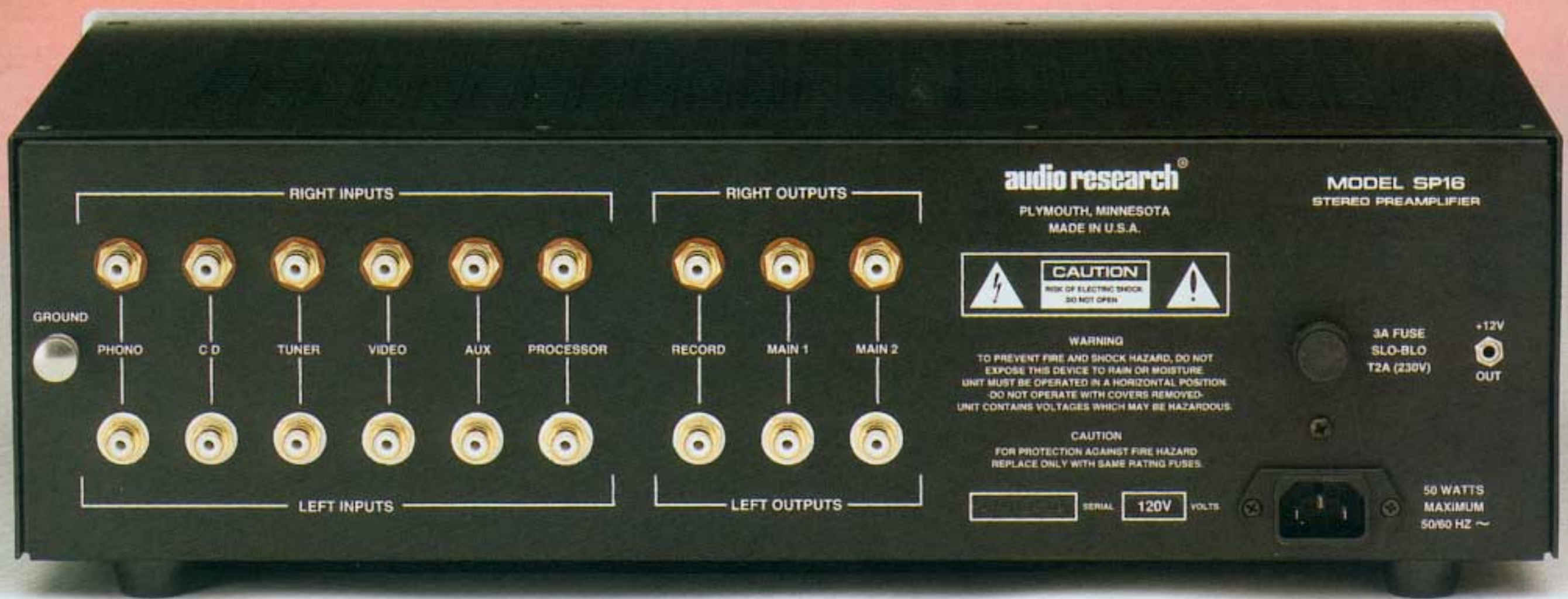
background of faint hum and noise; this SP16 is very quiet with no hint of noise unless you stick your head into the speakers cones. But the effect is more than an absence of hiss; it is as though a large window has been opened in the wall and the music just comes flooding through. There was a total absence of any form of "electronic fuzz" in the background.

With valve amplifiers I always start by listening to classical music. There is no logic to this, just a throwback to my youth when many such amplifiers didn't seem to have the grunt needed to reproduce rock music at the levels I desired. I know better now but the habit remains so I started with some of the excellent Opus3 recordings I used during my days at Quad. Listening to the Erik Westberg Vocal Ensemble's rendition of "Stilla sköna aftontimma" I enjoyed the sense of presence and immediacy through that widely opened window. The texture and interplay of the voices was fully revealed but in such a natural unforced way. This system wasn't trying to extract information from the recording; it was just there. Within minutes I'd forgotten about the review because I was just listening to the music. In fact after a week of listening I found that I had very little to say about this pre-amplifier but I had enjoyed an awful lot of music.

After a diversion to listen to the Dirty Dozen Brass Band and their goodtime rendition of "Junko Partner"; onto Gene Clark's original demo track of "Train leaves



Inside the SP16 uses traditional AR circuitry with two rows of three 12AX7EH valves providing the gain. Three valves are used for the phono stage and three for the line stage. To ensure a clean stable power supply there are no less than eight voltage regulating stages and some special DEC filter capacitor decoupling. All the inputs are switched by high-quality relays and the volume level is



here this morning" a song he later sold to The Eagles. Now you could hear the dirty texture of the Rhodes electric piano. The layers of instruments opened up with space between each layer and I was transported into the studio. This I liked; liked a lot. But there was one over-riding characteristic of the SP16 that I should end on. No matter which power amplifier you use; no matter what music you listen to be it Madness; Meatloaf or The Clash; the result is seducing; you just want to continue listening. A rare product indeed.

I really like the SP16. Yes it seems rather expensive but consider it an investment. It will serve you well and the day you want to part with it there will be plenty of people wanting to buy it from you. In the meantime you'll be enjoying your music as never before. Audio Research has always known how to get the best from "tubes" and with the SP16 it has proven that it hasn't lost its touch.

FACT FILE

- Frequency Response: Line: +0-1dB, 1Hz to 60kHz at rated output. -3dB points below 0.5Hz and above 100kHz.
- Phono: +/-0.3dB of RIAA, 10 Hz to 20kHz
- Distortion: Less than .007% at 2V RMS Single Ended output
- Gain: Main output line: 11.5dB
- Phono: 55dB at 1 KHz.
- Input Impedance: 50K ohms line, 47K ohms Phono
- Inputs: Phono, DC, tuner, video, aux, processor
- Cut out Impedance: 260 ohms Single Ended main; 20K ohms minimum load and 1000 pF maximum capacitance.
- Outputs: 2 main, 1 record
- Maximum Input Level: Line: 3.5 RMS Single Ended.
- Phono: 25 mVRMS 1KHz, 50mVRMS 10KHz
- Rated Outputs: 2V RMS Single Ended into 100K load.
- Maximum output: 15V RMS at 1% THD at 1kHz.
- Push Buttons: Volume up, volume down (70 steps, 20 LED indicators), Input, Processor, Mute, Power. All functions on IR remote control.
- Power Supplies: Electronically regulated low and high voltage supplies. Automatic 30-sec. warm-up/brown-out mute. Line regulation better than .01%.
- Noise: Line: 15uV RMS IHF weighted at main output with volume low (96dB below 1V RMS output).
- Phono: 0.9uV RMS IHF weighted equivalent input noise, shorted input (67dB below 2mVRMS 1KHz input).
- Valve Complement: 12 pieces AX7EH dual triodes.
- Dimensions (WxHxD): 17.75 x 5.2 x 10.0 ins 45 x 13.2 x 25.4 cm
- Price: £2499.99

